

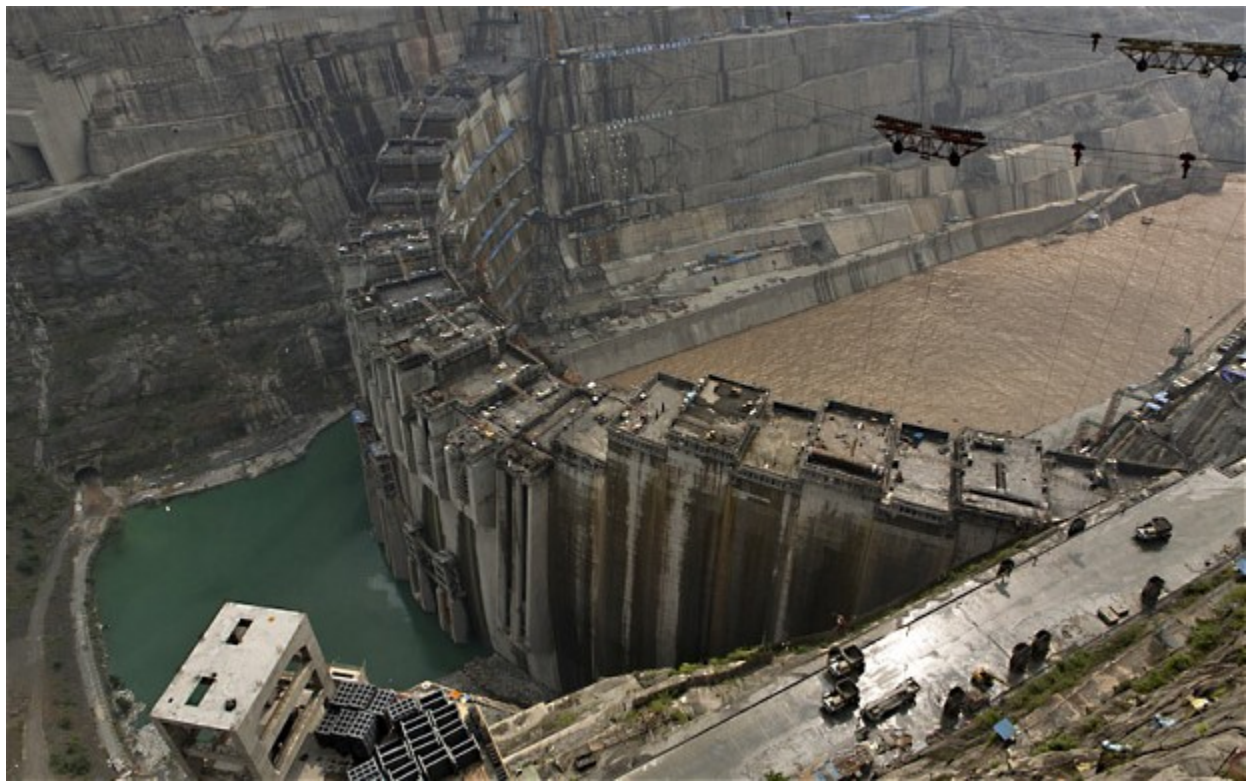
China rushes to build a new generation of mega-dams as thirst for power grows

China is rushing to build a new generation of super-dams on its rivers. The Daily Telegraph was the first Western news organisation to be given access to one of these mega-projects in Yunnan province.

by TOM PHILLIPS • SEPT. 13, 2012



A man reclaims bricks after excavators demolished homes in Fotan where many residents were forced to relocate to higher ground due to a rise in water levels as a result of the Xiluodu Dam project on the Jingsha River near Yongshan, Yunnan Photo: ADAM DEAN



Xiluodu Dam is seen under construction across the Jinsha River near Yongshan, Yunnan, China. Photo: Adam Dean

Feng Yinkai could do little but point and stare as the claw of a turquoise excavator skewered what was left of his riverside home, enveloping him in a haze of brown dust.

"My things are buried in there," the 64-year-old shouted. "That was my home."

Home, for Mr Feng, was Fotan, a picturesque village perched on the banks of the Jinsha or Golden Sands River in China's Yunnan province.

Now his house is gone – reduced to a heap of timber and dirt by demolition crews. And soon the village will also be lost forever, as one of two massive hydroelectric mega-projects near his home starts operating and the Jinsha's waters rise, sweeping Fotan from Chinese maps.

"Of course we are willing to move!" Mr Feng sniggered sarcastically as bulldozers levelled his community. "This is the Communist Party's land, isn't it?"

Mr Feng is one of hundreds of thousands of people facing relocation as [China](#) embarks on a new, multi-billion dollar hydropower drive in the country's southwest.

Following the completion of the Three Gorges dam in 2005, Beijing appeared to shy away from approving new hydroelectric "mega-projects" amid concerns about the environmental and human cost and the safety of building dams in earthquake-prone regions.

But campaigners say the race for China's rivers is now gaining momentum once again, as authorities battle to meet soaring energy demand while simultaneously slashing carbon emissions by making 15 per cent of its energy "clean" by 2020.

Ed Grumbine, an American conservationist based in Yunnan's capital Kunming, said China's thirst for energy and clean-power drive meant such projects were now being developed "actively and rapidly".

"The government has two incredibly strong and compelling reasons for it to move forwards. You have got to make a trade-off if your carbon footprint is as massive and [is] growing [as fast] as China's."

At the centre of China's latest hydro push is the Jinsha, a murky brown tributary of the world-famous Yangtze. Two vast projects – Xiluodu and Xiangjiaba – will soon go online here, becoming China's second and third biggest dams with joint capacity to produce around 20GW - enough to power almost all the homes in England. With an installed capacity of 12.6GW, Xiluodu is one of the biggest hydroelectric projects being built anywhere on earth.

Meanwhile a "cascade" of dozens more dams are planned or already under construction elsewhere on the 1429-mile river.

"The Jinsha is number one right now," said Grumbine, the author of a book about the fight to protect another of Yunnan's rivers. "We are talking about 30 [dams], something like that, and I would think most of them will be built."

The Daily Telegraph was the first western news organisation to be given access to Xiluodu, a 285.5m tall concrete colossus straddling the river border between Yunnan and Sichuan provinces.

Through the morning mist, the construction site resembles a futuristic citadel, its 21 towers humming with activity as thousands of workers race to complete an 18-turbine dam that will form a key part of China's energy future.

On surrounding mountains, giant billboards heap praise on the 67.5 billion yuan project that will reputedly be the world's third tallest dam, as high as a 95-story building.

"A model power plant, built with the bureau's full efforts!" boasts one. "Make full efforts to support reconstruction and relocation work!"

Yang Jiacong, a senior official from Yongshan county, where Xiluodu is located, said the dams were transforming the region; schools had been built, health care improved and incomes were rocketing. "[It is] is a good thing for the country and [the] people."

Outsiders are flocking to this isolated corner of China. Xiluodu's 62-room Pleasant China Hotel now welcomes foreign guests through two brand-new Ionic columns, including technicians from electronics giant Siemens who have draped a German flag from a second-floor balcony.

Impoverished migrant workers have also set up camp along the Jinsha, charging £5 a day to dismantle homes slated for demolition.

"The dam is good – at least it has brought us job opportunities," said Gan Longyin, 40, who is sleeping with his family in the shell of one gutted Fotan residence.

But environmentalists, geologists and river dwellers have major misgivings about the construction "frenzy".

"[The Jinsha] is big and beautiful. [But] if you have 25 dams and every 100km there is a dam then you don't have a river. You will never have a river again," said Liu Jianqing, an environmental journalist and campaigner. "It means you won't have fish, you will lose a lot of land and many people have to lose their homes. We call that a dead river."

Grumbine said there were concerns about building dams in an area prone to earthquakes.

"The government needs to pay more attention to the seismic issues. They down play that big time. If they build a dam and get the carbon benefits and then have a 6,7 or 8 point earthquake ... the dam is going to go and it is not going to be pretty," he said.

The Jinsha dams will displace fewer people than the Three Gorges dam, which saw at least 1.2m people relocated. But for those affected the impact has been immense.

"Nothing good has come out of it for us," complained Long Anji, 33, as he loaded his home, brick-by-brick, into a truck.

One of 39,210 people relocated in Yongshan county, Mr Long ran a grocers with his wife until officials ordered them out. "We can do nothing. Sometimes it is difficult to argue with the local government."

Some have taken shelter on a ravine above the Jinsha, cobbling shacks together with plastic and window frames stripped from homes that no longer exist.

"I have no plans for the future," said Bo Guangting, 58, a retired factory worker who said compensation had been insufficient to secure a new home. "We have no place to live and the government just ignores it."

Mr Bo claimed those who resisted relocation had been arrested, a story corroborated by other villagers. "We are still willing to support the country but we hope there will be a better solution for us," he said.

Mr Yang denied "violent or arbitrary methods were used on the people." "The majority of the people relocated are content since they moved to a new home and improved their [living] conditions. They just need some time to get adjusted to the new environment."

But there have been outbreaks of unrest along the Jinsha. Last year riot police quelled a "mass disturbance" in Suijiang town, where 60,000 people are being relocated because of the Xiangjiaba dam.

In towns and villages along the Jinsha locals voiced support Beijing but expressed mistrust and fear of local officials.

"We feel really sad and bitter," complained one man whose home in Sichuan province's Dukou village was destroyed in May to make way for the Xiangjiaba dam. He claimed the best compensation packages were reserved for those with ties to local officials. "We now have far too many corrupt officials."

Even traditional party allies said the relocation had stretched their loyalty to breaking point.

Inside his semi-demolished home an elderly retired official shook with anger as an earth-digger ripped down his neighbour's house.

"If the government actually comes to demolish my house as it is now, I'm going to risk my life and fight," he shouted. "We support nation building [and] the dam project, but the relocation treatment is not in accordance with the party line."

But with the bulldozers closing in, what more could he do?

"I'm over 70, and have lived long enough," he replied. "I will greet them with a bang."

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